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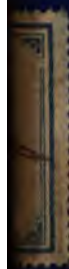
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THE
BLACK SHEEP
OF THE
PARISH





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LOTTIE HEATHCOTE AND HER MOTHER.

THE
BLACK SHEEP OF THE PARISH.

BY
THE LADY DUNBOYNE,

AUTHOR OF "THE MAITLANDS' MONEY-BOX,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.



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THE BLACK SHEEP OF THE PARISH.

CHAPTER I.

QUEEN MARGARET.

“SO the rumours that have been floating in the air are really coming true, and Uncle Henry is going to set up a curate! What do you say to the prospect, Meg? How will the Queen of Oldcourt like a Prime Minister to interfere with her domain?”

The speaker was a tall schoolboy, of the teasing age of fifteen; one of the few people who ventured to take liberties with his elder sister.

Margaret Gresham had been accustomed for nearly eight years to rule not only her father's house, but the whole parish and estate of Hacklebury, and it was little wonder if, at twenty, she was somewhat spoiled by the enjoyment of her undisputed sway.

Mrs. Gresham had died shortly after the birth of her youngest daughter, a delicate child now ten years old, who had been the object of Margaret's tenderest care, ever since she had

constituted herself the baby's guardian and protector against the rough play of sturdy Ralph, the next youngest in age.

The second girl was a gentle creature, who thought her elder sister perfection, and looked up to her with a simple homage which led, perhaps naturally, to a little tendency to domineering on the part of the stronger spirit. However, as time went on, almost every one, except perhaps the sisters themselves, recognised the fact that, if Margaret ruled the parish, Lina was the guardian spirit of the house. Little Belle's lessons were gradually handed over to her, and by degrees her father began to turn to Lina for help in the smaller details of domestic life. It was she who copied his letters, looked after the comforts of the few guests who visited their quiet house, arranged the flowers in the drawing-room, and kept the household accounts, always, however, dutifully submitting the latter to her sister's supervision. Margaret's time was fully engrossed with her Sunday school, her clothing club, coal club, parish library, the little dispensary which she kept in her own hands, and the wants, temporal and spiritual, of the twelve hundred inhabitants of the scattered parish of Hacklebury.

"She is worth more than a curate to me," the old rector, who was Mr. Gresham's uncle, had once said; and it was Margaret's pride and delight to dwell on the words. But as time went on, and the old gentlemen became more

and more feeble, it became evident to everyone but the squire's family, that he needed more efficient help than could be given by any female worker, however willing and enthusiastic.

"What have you heard now, Ralph?" asked Lina, in reply to her brother's question. "Is it anything definite, or only one of the many reports that have been circulated?"

"Nay," he answered, laughing, "I won't take upon myself to break the dreadful news to her Majesty. It is much too serious a matter, and I daresay you would not believe me after all. Go and ask Uncle Henry himself. He and my father have been closeted together all the morning, and the squire came home rubbing his hands and saying, 'Well, that is a good thing settled at last.'"

"And you are sure it means——"

"A curate, and what is more, a curate's wife and family! There, Miss Meg, the murder is out at last! I really am sorry for you."

Margaret's face expressed such utter blank dismay, that even Lina had some difficulty in repressing a smile, and of course the mischievous brother laughed aloud.

"Don't look so scared, my dear; there is really nothing more to tell! And, after all, what harm can the poor things do you? They won't bite, I imagine."

"What harm? Do you call it nothing to have strangers coming amongst us to upset every scheme at which I have laboured for all these

years? To have dear Uncle Henry tyrannised over in his old age, and his weakness taken advantage of by a meddling domineering woman?"

"Now, Margaret, we don't know that she is all that," her sister hastily interposed. "She may be very nice and kind, and a blessing to the place. You know we have often wished for some lady friend older than ourselves, whom we could consult on parish matters. By-the-by, Ralph, where are they to live?"

"In the White House. Uncle Henry is having it done up for them."

"And are there children?"

"One little girl about twelve, I think. The others all died of some fever in an unhealthy part of London, where they used to live."

"Perhaps this one may be a nice companion for Belle," suggested Lina; "she does not often have playfellows of her own age."

"I would rather not be in a hurry to let them set up a violent childish friendship," said Margaret, impatiently. "A little, pert London girl is not likely to do Belle any good, and the child is far safer without companions, than with any of the wrong sort."

"In fact, you are determined to take the blackest view of the Heathcote family generally!" said Ralph, firing a parting shot, as his sister rose to leave the room. "Go and talk to Uncle Henry, and do get your feathers smoothed the right way before we meet at luncheon. Are you

going too, Lina? Don't, I want my fishing tackle put to rights, and I thought you would come with me and try for a trout."

"I will, by-and-by, dear; but I think Margaret wants me now. Please don't tease her about this matter. I am afraid it really is a great disappointment to her."

The rectory was only five minutes' walk from



UNCLE HENRY.

Oldcourt Manor, and within a stone's throw of the beautiful little church which was the joy of Mr. Gresham's heart.

The old gentleman was superintending the nailing up of some refractory boughs of clematis over the porch, and the girls paused a moment to look admiringly at him, as he stood leaning on his long staff, his white hair and beard shining

silvery bright in the sun, and his kind old face smiling a reply to some observation of his gardener's. The smile brightened as he caught sight of the two girls approaching.

"Well, my queen, what brings you abroad so early? Are you giving yourself a holiday in honour of this lovely weather? Your father tells me nearly all his hay is carried: we may be thankful, indeed, that the rain has kept off so long."

"Ralph has been telling us some news, Uncle Henry," said Margaret, as the old gentleman sat down in the porch, with the girls on either side of him. "Is it really true?"

"What, about John Heathcote having accepted my curacy? Well, yes, I suppose so. I could not lose such a chance; he is a good man, and will be a blessing to my people when I am gone, and I am getting old, Maggie, though God has been very good to me in letting me keep all my faculties unimpaired. But fourscore years are no trifling burden, even without the care of souls, and it is right that a younger man should share the labour."

"And is he very good, uncle?" asked Lina, with childlike simplicity, while her sister waited eagerly for the answer.

"Good, child! if you searched London through you could not find another such man as John Heathcote. His heart and soul are in his work, and he knows that work to be the Lord's. He was my pupil years ago, and I never liked

one better, and now it is one of God's many and great mercies to me that he should return to be, as it were, the son and staff of my old age."

"You used to say that you hardly needed a curate, as long as I was at hand to work for you," said Margaret, trying to speak without expressing any bitterness in her tone.

"I know I did, my darling, and you have been my stay and comfort for many years, but old age creeps on more and more rapidly, and, sweet Meg, you cannot don a surplice, and aid my failing voice in the pulpit. It would be wronging my people were I to put this off any longer, and indeed it is a blessing to be thankful for, that Heathcote should be at liberty and able to respond to my call. His health has been failing, poor fellow, from over-work, and the pure air here will seem like new life to him and his wife after the back slums of London. They have had a sad life of it: two little ones laid low with that fearful typhus fever three years ago, and the one who is left sorely needing a healthier atmosphere. Mrs Heathcote says no one can guess the joy it will be to see John and the child in the country once again."

"And when do they come?"

"Not till the middle of August. I am having the White House re-papered and painted, and I hope it may be ready by then: otherwise, they must come here first for a few weeks."

A short silence followed, and then Mr. Gresham said somewhat deprecatingly: "By-the-by,

Margaret dear, I hardly know whether I ought to have let you coax me into putting that boy Charley Benson into the choir,—setting aside the fact that he has little or no voice, the lad is such a scamp, and the example he sets the younger ones is so bad. My eyes are somewhat failing now, and I don't notice things quickly, but Brown tells me he was making faces at little Willy Smith, all through the second lesson last Sunday. I cannot bear to do anything to vex you, my dear, and I know how fond you are of his mother,—and very naturally too, considering what a faithful, attached servant she was to your poor mother,—and so I've told Brown we'll give him another trial, but really if he does not behave better I am afraid he will have to be expelled.

"I will go and see his mother this afternoon," said Margaret. "I only hope Brown has not been scolding the boy—kindness is the only way to influence a nature like his—any other treatment makes him more obstinate and wilful than ever."

"That is a very comfortable theory for boys in general, and Master Charley in particular," said Mr. Gresham, laughing. "But, dear Meg, employ whatever means you think best, but do get your favourite pickle to behave better: I don't want Heathcote to think us a set of irreverent savages."

"Coming events cast their shadows before them," observed Margaret to her sister, as they walked home; "and certainly a great black

shadow is preceding Mr. Heathcote's arrival. Why need Brown have worried poor, dear Uncle Henry about a little boyish nonsense? Surely he could have spoken to me about Charley's misconduct, if it was anything worth noticing, and I daresay it was not. There is a good deal of jealousy and illnatured feeling about the poor boy, just because I am known to be fond of his mother."

"But, Margaret, I am afraid there really is some truth in this story," said Lina, reluctantly. "You know I was sitting in the corner of our seat on Sunday, and I did notice that there was a good deal of fidgetting and disturbance among the choir boys, and though I could not see Charley's face, I noticed that Willy Smith, who was opposite to him, was trying hard not to laugh."

"Well! I shall not condemn the poor boy unheard. We will go and see Mary Benson this afternoon."



CHAPTER II.

BRIGHT PROSPECTS.

"**M**OTHER, is it really true?" cried little Lottie Heathcote, running into the room where her mother sat busily sewing, one hot summer afternoon. The windows were open as far as they would go; but little fresh air was to be obtained in that close, narrow street, and the face which Mrs. Heathcote lifted to smile at her child's eager question, looked pale and careworn.

"Is what true, darling?"

"Why, father says we are to go and live in the country, amongst the green fields and wild roses, in a dear little white house with a porch, and creepers growing over it, and a garden in front, and——"

"Why, Lottie, dear, you had better take breath before you count up any more delightful things," said Mrs. Heathcote. "Yes, it really is true that father's kind old friend, Mr. Gresham, has asked him to come and be his curate. Thank God for the blessing of such a prospect! How often I have prayed that I might be able to see you and father in better air, and leading a healthier life. He has looked so very, very

worn since the hot weather set in ; and you are not much to boast of, my little town mouse."

"And what of mother herself? Not that that matters, does it, Lottie?" said Mr. Heathcote, who came in that moment, with a bright face, but an air of unspeakable weariness.

He sank into the arm-chair which Lottie pushed forwards for him, and smiled his thanks as the thoughtful child fetched his slippers.

His wife glanced at him anxiously: "The rest will not come too soon for you, John. I think another year such as the last would have broken you down utterly."

"What better fate can a soldier of Christ ask than to die at his post?" he asked, with rather a sad smile. "Dear wife, don't think me ungrateful, but sometimes I feel it almost breaks my heart to leave my work here. And then I think of you and Lottie, and feel how wicked it is not to rejoice entirely."

"But your work will not be neglected, father," said Lottie, soothingly. "You know you said Mr. Fenton had promised to carry out all that you have begun."

"True ; and he is a stronger and more effective instrument than I could ever have been."

"And you were the means of bringing him here," said Mrs. Heathcote.

"Yes — there is everything to make one thankful. It is very kind of old Mr. Gresham to have remembered us. He was like a father to me in the old days before my ordination ; and I

well remember the dark-red stone rectory, embowered in roses, and the beautiful little church which was the pride and joy of the old man's heart."

"And where will our own abode be?" asked Mrs. Heathcote, smiling at Lottie's eager eyes.

"Nay, you must not expect me to remember too much. It is seventeen years since I left Hacklebury, and doubtless the village is much altered. I have, however, a hazy recollection of a white cottage somewhere near the school, where tradition said Mr. Gresham had once lived in his younger days, and which would probably fall to the curate's lot. I think it had a garden and a big walnut tree in front, but I am not at all clear as to anything more."

"How large is the parish?"

"About two thousand acres. I fancy the houses are somewhat scattered. The squire is Mr. George Gresham, nephew to my old friend."

"Has he a wife and children?"

"I believe Mrs. Gresham died some few years after I left; but there are, I think, two grown-up daughters, and some younger children. I do not know how many, but possibly Lottie may find a playfellow amongst them. Well! I must not sit idling here, talking to you two any longer. I have those notes to prepare for the confirmation class to-morrow, and Robert Steel is coming up presently."

"Poor fellow, how he will miss you!"

"Yes, I am afraid he will, and though Fenton

is quite ready to be friendly with him, he does not readily take to a new face."

"I cannot wonder at his devotion to you," said Mrs. Heathcote, "when I think how it was earned. Oh, John, that was indeed a fearful time! Do you remember how the small-pox spread through the whole of this district till there was scarcely a house free from infection, and how our hearts were lightened when kind Mrs. Grey carried Lottie off with her own bairns to Eastbourne? I remember, as if it were yesterday, how I used to see you go out on your rounds each day without daring to think what might befall ere night."

"God was very merciful to us," said Mr. Heathcote reverently. "Poor Steel! his was a bitter trial, but I think it has been the means of awakening his soul to better things."

"Ah! he will never forget that you stood by his wife's bedside when she was dying, and the neighbours had fled in terror, and that through your means the doctor arrived in time to save those poor, little twin children. I remember the grip he gave my hand as he said, 'Yon parson of yours is a man, and a good one. If I ever can do him a good turn, I will.'"

"Nay, it was little enough to do from one Christian man to another—nothing more than my duty. Do you know, Mary, the other day I heard a soldier say, in speaking of some glorious achievement which had earned the highest military reward in the service, 'It was a mistake—

these are given too easily now-a-days—they only did their duty.” What more need we ask or pray for than, that, in the day of the great awards, it may be said of us, ‘They have done what they could’?”

“Mother,” said Lottie, when her father had gone down to his study, “shall you be able to have your mothers’ meeting and sewing classes at Hacklebury like you have here?”

“We shall see, dear. Things are different in a country parish, and besides we must not forget that we shall be strangers at first, interlopers perhaps the Miss Greshams may think. No doubt, having no mother, they have been accustomed to manage all village matters, and naturally they would not like to be interfered with hastily. But we will find work to do, never fear, and even if it is something of a holiday at first, perhaps I shall not be *very* sorry.”

“No, you poor, dear, hard-worked mammy,” said Lottie, stroking the thin hand that was still busily at work; “and oh! think of being in the country! Why, you have not seen it for two years, except that one day that father took the work-house children to Hampstead. How they did enjoy it! Do you remember how some of them asked what ‘them big red things’ were, when they saw the roses in the gardens by the road-side?”

“And the daisy chains the little ones made! Who knows, Lottie, we may perhaps have a rose-tree in our garden, and daisies on the lawn!”

“And a honeysuckle! Oh, mother, if there is a honeysuckle growing over the house, I think I shall be quite too happy!”

And the mother and daughter continued to indulge in a happy little scheme of castle-building, until the long summer evening had faded into twilight, and it was time to summon Mr. Heathcote to their evening meal.



CHAPTER III.

CHARLEY.

"**I** DON'T know what to do with the boy, Miss Gresham, and that's the truth. He ain't a bad dispositioned lad, but he's that heedless and fond of mischief and larking that no one won't employ him for more than just a job, and I'm well nigh worn out with the worry."

"Well, but, nurse dear, have you talked seriously to him yourself? Surely he would mind you, if you put it strongly to him."

"Talked, Miss! I've talked till I'm out of breath, and out of heart besides. You know the work it used to be to get him to school, though he could learn fast enough when he tried. You see, my poor sister spoiled him when he was little, having none of her own, and now the mischief is beginning to tell. I wish I'd never give my own child up—I do—though it was to please your poor mamma and nurse dear Master Ralph I did it. If I'd known all the mischief as would follow——"

"But, dear nurse, how can any of us tell what may be going to happen? And everybody says Ralph would never have lived if it had not been for you, so you must not let me hear you are

sorry you came to poor mamma when she wanted you so badly. Will you send Charley up to me this evening? You know he generally minds my scoldings more than any one's, and I really am very much vexed with him for behaving so badly last Sunday in the choir."

"And please, Miss Margaret, if he promises to be a good boy and stick to his work, couldn't you get Mr. Gale to take him on again? I'd be so glad if he could get a place near, and come home o' nights. Mr. Gale always said he was a sharp lad, and had the making of a good workman in him, only he wouldn't attend to orders, and was saucy to the mistress when she found fault with him."

The speaker was a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman, wearing a widow's cap, and a dress which, with her manner and general appearance, showed tokens of having been in a better station of life than the ordinary cottagers. She had been maid to Mrs. Gresham in the early days of that lady's married life, and had left her to become the wife of a good-looking underkeeper, much against the wishes and advice of her friends. For a few months all went on so well that Mrs. Benson began to glory in her own wisdom, which had been so much more acute than that of her advisers; but all too soon she was rudely awakened from her happy dream, by finding that she was tied for life to a confirmed drunkard.

Charles Benson was not, however, long spared to be the torment, as he had once been the pride,

of his wife's heart. He was drowned one stormy night in attempting to cross the millstream on a ricketty bridge, and though much pity was felt for the young widow, no one could help saying that she was perhaps spared a yet more miserable fate.

Her sister, the childless wife of a well-to-do farmer in the neighbourhood, opened her doors to her, and at the farm, some three months after his father's death, little Charley was born. His aunt, who was passionately fond of children, took to the boy from the first, and was almost jealous of his mother's superior claims.

A few weeks later Mrs. Gresham, who had for some time been in declining health, became the mother of her first boy. The "young squire's" birth caused great excitement in the village, bells rang merrily and bonfires were lighted, but soon an alarming report was spread that both the mother and babe were extremely weak, and that the former would certainly sink if a nurse were not provided. Mrs. Gresham's one cry was for her dear Mary, the faithful servant who had nursed her through many a former illness, and to whom alone she could contentedly resign her wailing infant. Urged by her entreaties, Mr. Gresham rode off to the farm, and himself earnestly begged that Mrs. Benson would accede to the request to become his child's nurse.

The mistress of the farm, who saw in this arrangement the prospect of obtaining entire possession of her baby-nephew, warmly supported Mr.

Gresham's request, and the young widow, torn to pieces between her affection for her child and her long-standing attachment for her mistress, at last agreed to accept the squire's liberal terms, believing that she was thus doing the best for her child. Her sister joyfully promised to devote herself to the latter, and for six years little Charley was the pet and darling of his uncle's farm.

During these years Mary Benson remained at the manor house, devoting herself to her mistress and the children, especially to her nursling Ralph, who did credit to her care, by developing into a fine sturdy boy. Then came Mrs. Gresham's long illness and little Belle's birth, followed within a few months by the death of her gentle mother.

Mary Benson *could* not leave her charges at such a time, and she stayed on, though feeling uneasy at the accounts which frequently reached her from the farm.

Charley was growing up a pleasant-looking, curly-headed lad, with his father's winning tongue, and, it was much feared, a decided tendency to his father's scampish ways. No one could manage him; the schoolmistress said he was more plague than any other boy of the same age who had passed through her hands, the labourers on the farm complained of his many mischievous tricks, and his uncle, with a mixture of pride and impatience, declared that there was not another so saucy a young rascal in the country.

All at once the aunt, whose indulgence had so spoiled him, died suddenly, and a few weeks later

the news spread through the village that Farmer Matthews had been ruined by the failure of a local bank.

Mrs. Benson hastened to her brother-in-law, and found it to be only too true. His money was gone, the farm and stock must be sold, and his home broken up, and he should seek his fortune in America. But what was to become of Charley?

Mrs. Benson could not hesitate; her boy had the first claim upon her, and she must make a home for him, at any rate until he was old enough to earn something for himself. So with many tears she took leave of her motherless charges, and entered into possession of a neat little cottage, not far from the school, which in return for her long services, Mr. Gresham allowed her to occupy rent free.

Unluckily Charley was exactly the kind of boy not likely to do well under a mother's sole guardianship. He needed a man's hand and a man's authority to keep his lawless spirit under control, and though good hearted and frank natured, he managed to embitter his poor mother's life by the number of scrapes into which he fell, one after another, in rapid and apparently hopeless succession. He became old enough to leave school and earn his own maintenance, but scarcely any one could be found willing to give permanent employment to one so careless and idle, and so apt, on slight provocation, to become impertinent to those over him.

The fact was that, as his mother said, he had

been thoroughly spoiled in early life, and his natural wilfulness fostered by over indulgence.

For his mother's sake Mr. Gresham had once or twice given him employment in the garden or home farm, but both the bailiff and head gardener were so loud in their complaints that he had to be dismissed.

Then a good-natured farmer who had known his uncle in former days took him on a job, and Charley, who could work when he chose, really did seem to have turned over a new leaf, and to be trying to give satisfaction. One of his best points was his kindness to animals; and it was an acknowledged fact, even by those who had least toleration for his bad habits, that every horse, cow, and dog on the farm would follow Charley Benson in preference to anyone else. Mr. Gale, who was a kindly man himself, noted this with pleasure, and as herd-boy on his farm Charley seemed at last in a fair way to retrieve his character.

Such a state of things, however, was too good to last. Some of the bad companions among whom he had unfortunately become a favourite, tempted him to the public-house one Sunday evening, and sent him home not exactly intoxicated, but in a stupid, confused state, which caused him to be late for milking time. His mistress, like all good farmers' wives, was greatly annoyed at the unpunctuality, and spoke her displeasure sharply. Charley was foolish enough to give an insolent reply, which was reported to his master, and caused his immediate dismissal.

Poor Mrs. Benson was sadly disappointed. The wages which Charley had proudly brought home every Saturday night had been a great help towards their maintenance, for she was not strong enough to do more than a little plain needlework herself, and was thus chiefly dependent on the small pension paid to her by Mr. Gresham. To have a big hungry boy loitering about at home was no small grievance, and she was too well aware of the fact that "Satan finds some mischief still for idle hands to do," since Charley's whole time now appeared to be spent with the bad companions who had already done him so much harm. "And they're learning him to smoke, too, Miss Margaret," she said with a mournfulness which almost made the young ladies smile.

"Well, nurse, it is a very bad habit, and we must try and stop it; but, after all, it is not really a crime—not so bad as drinking or gambling at any rate."

"Oh! Miss, but one leads on to the other, and idleness is at the root of all. But if you would just speak to Mr. Gale——"

And this being the burden of the good woman's song, Margaret at last promised to do her best, and the two sisters walked on towards the field, where they expected to find Mr. Gale stacking his late crop of hay. The farmer, a fine-looking man with a kind, weather-beaten face, was giving some orders to his men as they approached, and Margaret waited until he was at liberty before cautiously approaching the subject of her mission.

It was a more difficult matter than she had anticipated. At the first mention of the boy's name, Mr. Gale's face darkened perceptibly, and he scarcely allowed her to finish her sentence before hastily replying, "I am very sorry to disoblige you, Miss Gresham, but I do not think I can bring myself to take on that boy again. He is such a thoroughly good-for-nothing young rascal, it is quite impossible to trust him for a moment out of your sight, and my wife said he spoke so cheekily to her too,—no, Miss, indeed I don't think I can do this, even for your asking."

Margaret only smiled. She knew that she seldom failed to obtain her own way in the long run, and she had little fear that any of her father's tenants, with whom she was a supreme favourite, would prove obdurate to any request of hers.

"I am very sorry he should have behaved so badly, Mr. Gale, but boys at the best are very troublesome creatures, and Charley is at least free from some serious faults which are worse even than a natural spirit of mischief. For instance, I don't think you have ever found him dishonest? Nor," as the farmer shook his head, "unkind to any of your animals?"

"No, I will say that for him, I never saw a boy more good to dumb beasts. And he is handy about them too,—'tis a pity he should be such an idle, disobedient chap, for there is something one can't help liking about him."

"There, dear Mr. Gale, for his poor mother's sake, won't you try him once more? It really

would be an act of kindness, and I don't think you would regret it. He has had a lesson, you see, and would be on his best behaviour."

The farmer shook his head and tried to look stern, though with a shadow of relenting in the corners of his mouth. "You'll have to talk to my Missis, I think, Miss Gresham. She was very much put about at the way the boy behaved to her. I don't expect she'll hear of my taking him back.

"Well, I'll walk up to the farm and see Mrs. Gale," said the persevering Margaret. "I don't think she'll refuse me, if I ask it as a favour, and I may say you consent if she does?"

"I am blessed if I ever knew one like you for getting their own way," said the farmer, turning away with a kind of good-humoured impatience. "However, I don't believe as you'll talk over the Missis."

But, Miss Gresham did contrive, in a manner best known to herself, to overcome the objections of the obdurate "Missis," and the result was that the following week Charley found himself re-established in his former place. Whether it was good for him to regain so easily what had been forfeited by his own misconduct may be doubted; but at any rate, his mother was in a state of cheerful jubilation, and ready to exalt to the skies the kindness and cleverness of the dear young lady to whom he owed his restoration.

CHAPTER IV.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

ON a bright evening towards the middle of August, a fly laden with luggage was slowly ascending the last hill leading from Fullington to the village of Hacklebury. A lady was sitting in it, leaning forward to smile an answer to the eager observations of a little girl, who, with her father, was walking beside the carriage.

"Mother, it's even more lovely than I expected! There are *such* ferns in the hedges! And fox-gloves, and red campion—and, oh! heaps more whose names I forget; and look, look! they are cutting the corn in this next field."

"The wheat and the tares together," said Mr. Heathcote, pausing to gaze as the swathes of yellow corn, mingled with scarlet poppies and blue corn-flowers, fell before the great reaping machine. "Does it not seem sad that what looks so fair and lovely should be worthless?"

"What a picture!" cried Mrs. Heathcote, standing up to feast her town-bred eyes on the scene—the broad expanse of waving corn golden in the low sunlight, the faces of the reapers glowing above their white shirts, the big horses stepping cheerfully along at their work, and the

farmer stripped like his men, and working as hard as any of them, standing proud and hopeful in their midst, exulting in his splendid crop.

"How happy, and healthful, and prosperous it looks after London. Oh! John, I am more and more thankful."

"So am I. Yet even in the country all is not unmixed happiness. See there;" and Mr. Heathcote pointed to an over-laden cart drawn by a weary horse, which had stopped exhausted on the side of the hill, evidently unable to proceed farther with so heavy a freight.

"At your old tricks again, Dick Moore!" the flyman called to the carter, a surly-looking young fellow, who was endeavouring by tugs and blows to get the animal to proceed. "You'll have to take some of them stones out before the old horse will do it."

"Do help him to lighten his load," said Mr. Heathcote. "I can hold your horses meantime, and we don't mind waiting. He might leave some of the stones with which the cart is laden at the cottage here, and return for them. The horse will never get up the hill as it is."

The flyman shook his head. "No use to interfere with surly Dick, sir, I'm afraid; however, I'll try." He got down from the box accordingly, but his well-meant offers of assistance were only responded to by abuse, and renewed ill-treatment of the poor horse.

Lottie was almost in tears, and Mr. Heathcote, notwithstanding his dislike to such a com-

mencement of his pastoral duties, was moving forward in great indignation, when from a cottage adjoining the road two young ladies suddenly emerged. In a moment the taller of the two caught sight of the uplifted whip of the brutal carter, and, stepping quickly up to him, she said, in a clear, resolute voice: "For shame! Don't you see that the horse is willing enough? but he can't draw such a load as that up the hill. Take some of the stones off."

The order was imperiously given, and the man seemed for a moment half inclined to obey; but yielding to his sullen instincts, he muttered, "I can't be wasting my time over such folly;" and again he struck the horse. The young lady's eyes flashed fire, and the flyman smiled knowingly as he turned back to relieve Mr. Heathcote from his charge. "It'll be all right, sir, now Miss Gresham has taken it in hand. There's none for ten miles round about here as dare gainsay her."

"Had you not better see if she wants any help?" asked Mr. Heathcote.

"No need, sir,—see there;" and even as he spoke a boy was seen running across the harvest-field in answer to a beckoning gesture from the young lady. He was a bright-faced, pleasant-looking lad, with roguish blue eyes and a countenance expressing both quickness and mischief.

"Here, Charley," said Miss Gresham, "I want you to lend a helping hand."

"All right, ma'am," said the boy, taking in the situation at a glance, and running to place a large stone behind one of the cart-wheels; after which he sprang into the cart and began the work of unloading with such good-humour and dexterity that the carter could not for very shame avoid doing his share.

In the meantime Miss Gresham quietly slipped the bit out of the horse's mouth, and her sister supplied it with choice and dewy handfuls of grass from the shady side of the hedge.

The Heathcotes went on their way a good deal impressed with this little scene.

"That girl has plenty of character, or I am much mistaken," said Mr. Heathcote. "It was good to see how she overcame that surly fellow's resistance."

"That was resolution in a good cause," answered his wife; "but I should think Miss Gresham is one who likes her own way at all times. She has a fine face, but I should not like to be compelled to differ from her."

"What a nice boy that was who came running to help," observed Lottie. "Did you notice, father, how pleased he seemed to be to do anything for Miss Gresham, and how good he was to the poor horse?"

"Ah, there's the church!" cried Mr. Heathcote. "How unchanged,—and here, not a stone's-throw from it, is the rectory gate, and my dear old friend standing in his porch."

"John, you are welcome; it does my heart

good to see you here again, and to greet your wife and child."

"Dear sir, we are so glad to come."

The words were eagerly interchanged, and the old man's trembling hand rested lovingly on Lottie's head as her father drew her forward.

"The White House is nearly ready," continued Mr. Gresham; "but I could not resist the pleasure of claiming you here for a few weeks first, if Mrs. Heathcote will put up with an old bachelor's ways."

"Indeed, it is a great kindness," said Mrs. Heathcote, earnestly; "we shall be so glad to look about us before beginning housekeeping under such new circumstances. What a paradise of flowers!" glancing round at the roses, now in the full glory of their second bloom; the tall golden sunflowers standing out against the background of evergreens, the neatly kept beds of geraniums and calceolaria, and a splendid tree-fuschia covered with crimson tassels which stood in the centre of the lawn.

"Yes, I do think this month in fine weather is the crown of the whole year; and, thank God! we have a glorious harvest this season."

"We admired one field in particular on our road here," said Mrs. Heathcote; and she proceeded to relate the little scene which had taken place with the over-laden cart. The old man listened with a smile of loving pride and interest.

"That was she; that was my little Queen

Meg. Trust her for getting her own way in all the country round here, with man or woman, gentle or simple."

The garden gate clicked as he spoke, and two girls came up the drive, in whom Mrs. Heathcote recognised those she had already seen.

"How quickly they must have walked!" Lottie exclaimed; "why, they have got here almost as soon as we did."

"There is a short cut across the fields," Mr. Gresham explained. "Well Maggie, well Lina, my darlings; you have come to help me welcome my friends."

"I don't think we need a formal introduction," said Mrs. Heathcote, shaking hands with the younger girl, whose bright cordial smile was at that moment far more winning than her sister's grave bow and murmured response.

"We have met already; and I am sure, Miss Gresham, that my little Lottie, at least, owes you a debt of deep gratitude for sparing her a painful sight."

"It was not difficult," said Margaret, quietly. "I knew I could get plenty of help from Mr. Gale and his men; and of course one could not allow such brutality to pass unchecked."

"My wife took a great fancy to your coadjutor," said Mr. Heathcote. "He was a nice, open-faced, bright-mannered boy."

Margaret smiled, and glanced at her uncle, who observed gaily, "Ah, Heathcote! you are a fortunate man. I fancy you could not have hit

on a more diplomatic speech than that, if you wished to win Maggie's good graces. If I am not mistaken, the boy you speak of is her particular pet—none the less so, that he is regarded by many as the black sheep of the parish."

"Nay," said Mrs. Heathcote, who saw how Margaret coloured with vexation at this speech. "You should not make unfair revelations, Mr. Gresham, and prejudice my husband against any of his future charges. And, indeed, it would be difficult to make me believe anything very bad of that pleasant-looking lad."

Margaret looked slightly mollified at this speech; but she left it to her sister to express the civilities which were the object of their present visit. "Papa hopes to call on Mr. Heathcote to-morrow; he has been to inspect the work at the White House to-day, and hopes all is going on satisfactorily. And if we can be any—any use or help to you in settling in, we shall be so glad," added Lina, with a shy appealing glance at her sister.

"Thank you very much," Mrs. Heathcote replied, gratefully. "I am sure there are many things that I shall be glad to consult you about, as you are so kind, when I have had time to collect my thoughts. Our most pressing want is that of a maid—our old servant, who has been everything to us for many years (since Lottie was a baby), is coming to join us as soon as we begin housekeeping again; but we want a nice,

active girl to assist in the house work, and I though that very possibly the parish might supply one."

"Oh, yes!" Lina exclaimed, quickly; "there is Alice Stubbs—would it not be the very place for her, Margaret?"

"I don't know;" Margaret hesitated, and cast a reproachful look at her sister. "You know papa talked of taking Alice to help in the kitchen at home when Mary leaves."

"But that was only to please us, and Alice is much more suited to a housemaid's place; but," noticing the cloud on her sister's brow, "there is no hurry about all this, and we are keeping Mrs. Heathcote from resting;" and with a few more civil speeches, the girls took their leave, Lina pausing to tell Lottie that her little sister would be so pleased to have a companion so near her own age.

"I wish," said Margaret, as soon as they were outside the rectory gate, "that you had not such a propensity for meeting strangers with open arms. I know you cannot help that sweet winning manner of yours, but it makes me seem ten times colder and less gracious by way of contrast."

"Well, but are you not pleasantly surprised?" said Lina, eagerly. "I am almost sure we shall get fond of Mrs. Heathcote, and that little Lottie has such a sweet, sensible face—too old for her years, poor child! I am sure they have gone through great troubles, Mr. Heathcote looks so

thin and worn ; but this must seem such a haven of rest."

"I never take to people at first sight;" and, with this ultimatum, Lina was forced to be content, well knowing argument to be worse than useless.



CHAPTER V.

DISTURBANCES IN THE CHOIR.

A FEW weeks more saw the Heathcotes established at the White House, where Lottie's delight was supreme at being allowed to have some Dorking fowls under her own especial care. The garden, which had been neglected during the unoccupied state of the house, required a good deal of attention; but this, so the mother and daughter averred, made it all the more interesting.

Mr. Heathcote preached his in-coming sermon on the Sunday afternoon after his arrival, and in spite of village prejudice, was allowed to be a quiet well-spoken gentleman.

Of course it took some time for the Londoners to become accustomed to —shire ways; but the inhabitants of Hacklebury were for the most part a simple, kindly people, a little old fashioned and behind the times, owing to their distance from town and railroad, but not devoid of a certain slow, shrewd humour, which Mr. Heathcote knew how to respond to and appreciate.

Everything had hitherto been, of course, entirely managed by the Court—clothing club, library, night schools, had all been in the young

ladies' hands, and with the best intention in the world, their inexperience had allowed abuses to creep in, which Mr. Heathcote soon found out. The task of amending them was difficult, and he set about it as gently and gradually as he could ; but it was impossible altogether to avoid giving offence. Those who had hitherto profited unfairly by the mistakes, were loud in their complaints of the new parson's interference, and Margaret was only too willing to sympathise in their grievances.

The needle-work in the school was, it must be owned, considerably below the average, and the Miss Greshams had often lamented over it together, and wished that the mistress were more particular ; yet when Mrs. Heathcote ventured to express the same opinion, Margaret, from a sheer spirit of opposition, undertook her defence.

Little Belle was not long in forming a warm friendship with her contemporary, and the children spent every spare moment of their play-time together ; but their happiness was marred by the knowledge (never expressed in words) that Miss Gresham somehow did not quite approve of their alliance. In more serious matters the same spirit prevailed. It was not long before, as the old clerk had prophesied, " a to-do " took place about the choir boys. Mr. Heathcote's quick eye had discovered certain symptoms of irreverent and unmannerly conduct among the latter one Sunday morning in church, and as soon as the service was over he had them all up before him in the vestry.

He spoke a few words to them, strongly setting forth the sin of irreverence, and ended by an assurance that were the offence repeated the culprit, be he who he might, should be expelled from the choir. For this time he would mention no names, although he well knew who were the ringleaders in the offence, but he warned them to be careful for the future, as he never uttered a threat which he did not mean to fulfil.

"There's one for you, Charley, my boy!" said a big lad of sixteen, clapping Charley Benson on the shoulder as the latter, looking somewhat crestfallen, walked down the churchyard path. "The young ladies' pet will catch it now, if he don't look sharp! Shan't we see him a good boy in future, with his eyes turned up and his shoulders pulled down, like this"—and Jack Holmes made a ridiculous face, which sent the rest of the party into a roar of laughter. "If Charley's a good lad, and does as he's told, who knows but he'll end by being the parson's pet as well as the ladies'!"

"That I won't," cried Charley, shaking himself free with a furious gesture. "What right has a stranger like he to come ordering us all about! I ain't going to heed what he may say."

"Well said; that's a lad of spirit!" and Jack, who was the evil genius of the widow's son, again clapped him approvingly on the shoulder. "Stick up for yourself and fear no one."

"I don't," said Charley recklessly; and the applause which followed the words made him feel

himself a hero. He spent that afternoon in Jack Holmes's company, and before they parted a scheme had been concocted for setting the curate at defiance on the following Sunday.

Many times in the week did Charley's heart misgive him as he thought of Miss Margaret's kindness, and the pain and grief it would be to his mother if he were turned out of the choir; but the silly boy considered his honour pledged, and he would not now turn back. He entertained, however, a faint hope that he might behave as ill as he pleased and yet avoid observation, and for this purpose took care to place himself behind John Turner, the broad-shouldered bass of the choir. John, however, who was a staunch supporter of Mr. Heathcote, was, as he expressed it, "up to his tricks," and moved aside just as Charley produced the bag of nuts which he was wont to crack with quaint grimaces and distribute amongst the boys, and the usual sniggering and suppressed laughter began.

Long before the first lesson was over, Charley knew his fate; he had caught Mr. Heathcote's eye full upon him, and that very knowledge made him reckless. His conduct became so outrageous that Mr. Heathcote with difficulty refrained from publicly ordering him to leave the church. Regard for Miss Gresham, and pity for the widowed mother, caused him to wait until the service was over, and then in a few sad, stern words, the offender's fate was sealed.

Charley tried hard to brave it out, and even

walked up the path whistling softly to himself; but once out of sight and hearing of his companions, his pretended indifference broke down, and he burst into tears.

Turned out of the choir! debarred from the cheerful supper at Christmas time, and the magic lantern or Christmas tree with which they were always entertained; worse still, disgraced in the eyes of the whole parish, and of the young ladies who had been so kind to him—what would his mother say?

The Miss Greshams passed him in the lane, and Margaret turned her head away in sorrowful displeasure; but Lina gave him a compassionate glance, and noticed how red and tear-swollen were his eyes.

"He is very sorry, I know," Margaret said; "if only things were as they used to be there might be some hope of making an impression on him by kindness now; but Mr. Heathcote's harsh treatment will harden and ruin him."

"I don't know," said Lina, hesitating; "perhaps, for the sake of others, it is right to make an example when some one has been behaving very badly."

"At any rate we cannot interfere now," said Margaret bitterly. "Mr. Heathcote must be answerable for whatever harm may follow."

Lina sighed; she had thought that perhaps a word from her sister might have a good influence on the boy in his present softened mood, but she never ventured to offer advice to Margaret's

superior wisdom, and contented herself as usual with feeling sure that her sister knew best.

From this day Charley Benson fell more and more under the influence of the companions who had already done him so much harm ; he shunned church and the night-school, and kept out of the Miss Greshams' way, and did his work at the farm so carelessly that his master repeatedly threatened to dismiss him. His mother, who had been growing more hopeful about him, sighed and lamented in vain ; she seldom saw him except in the evenings, and then he was usually tired or sullen, or too stupefied with his newly-acquired habit of smoking to talk.



CHAPTER VI.

A RIDE ON STELLA.

THE autumn was now advancing, and Lottie Heathcote had golden beech leaves and scarlet hips and haws in which to take delight, instead of roses and fox-gloves, and many a pleasant half-holiday was spent by her and Belle in hunting for nuts and blackberries.

They had planned an afternoon of this kind one fine Saturday towards the end of October, when their arrangements were altered by Margaret, who told her little sister that she and Lina were going to take a long walk to the small neighbouring town of Oxenden, and as they should take the pony to ride in turn, Belle might, if she pleased, accompany them.

Belle sighed a little over her friend's disappointment, but a ride on Black Stella was an irresistible temptation, and she ran joyfully to get ready,

Squire Gresham (so called to distinguish him from his uncle) was away from home, and the old coachman did not feel quite easy in his mind at his young ladies going so far alone.

"If so be as Miss Belle is to ride, Miss Gresham," he said, respectfully, "you'd best let

me come along. The pony's uncommonly fresh ; she has done next to no work since you rode her last."

" Oh, Watson, you need not be afraid. Miss Lina or I will ride her first, and one of us can lead her when Miss Belle rides. She never does anything wrong, does she, my pet ?" And Margaret stroked the glossy neck as the coachman, who still looked uneasy, assisted Lina to mount. The pony asserted herself by a series of pretty gambols of little consequence to an experienced rider, but which Belle regarded somewhat with awe. Margaret assured her that she would be quite quiet presently, and the party set off for their expedition.

Oxenden was reached without any adventure, and Margaret accomplished her errand, while Lina held the pony on which Belle was now mounted. The creature was not in the least vicious, but full of spirit, and decidedly too much for a very youthful rider.

Coming home Margaret proposed that they should take a different route leading through pretty by-lanes to the lower end of the village, near the White House. Belle was well pleased, and suggested that Lottie might ride a little way, to which Margaret gave a somewhat doubtful consent. The sisters had each ridden in turn, Belle of course enjoying the lion's share of the pleasure. She had just remounted for the third time, and, patting Stella's neck, was declaring that she felt quite at home on her now, when a

rabbit, scudding across the lane, caused the pony to start and prance. Belle was frightened, and pulled the curb so suddenly as to make her rear slightly. Margaret and Lina, who were a little behind, hastily called to her to loosen the reins.

At that moment a gun, suddenly fired in an adjoining field, frightened the pony so that she became unmanageable. The sisters sprang forward, and Margaret snatched at the reins, but too late. A side-plunge, followed by a kick, had unseated the little slight figure, and Belle was thrown with some violence, falling, happily, clear of the pony, which started off at full gallop. With a face of agony which haunted Lina for many a day afterwards, Margaret bent over her darling as she lay white and motionless on the ground.

"Not dead!—not dead!" she moaned. "O God, spare her! Belle, my darling—little Belle, open your eyes for Maggie's sake,—speak to me one word."

"She is stunned," said Lina, who was trembling very much, but forced herself to speak cheerfully for her sister's sake; "she must be only stunned; there was no stone where she fell."

She loosened the child's dress, and looked round in despair for water. There was a little in the ditch by the road-side, and in this they soaked their handkerchiefs, and laid them on her forehead. No wound was visible, but a little cut over the left temple.

"We must fetch some one," Margaret said.
"You go, Lina ; I cannot leave her."

"The White House is nearest," said Lina ;
"there are no cottages in this lane." And she set
off as fast as her trembling limbs would permit.

At the corner of the lane she found Stella
grazing ; and, happily, the creature knew her
mistress and allowed her to mount quietly, so



BELLE THROWN FROM THE PONY.

that a few minutes' fast riding brought Lina to
the garden gate of the White House.

If at such a moment she could have noticed
anything, Lina would have been pleased and
amused at the scene before her. Mr. Heathcote,
with his coat off, was hard at work with a little
mowing machine, having just finished his sermon
for the morrow, and come out to refresh himself

with change of labour. Lottie, clad in a big gardening apron, was helping her mother to tie up straggling stocks of carnations and tall Michaelmas daisies; and all three were talking so merrily over their work that they did not heed the clattering hoofs until they stopped suddenly at their own gate.

"Oh, Mrs. Heathcote" (Lina scarcely knew her own voice, it sounded so hoarse and strange), "please help us. Belle has been thrown; she is stunned, and we cannot bring her round."

"Where is she?" asked Mr. Heathcote, hastily throwing on his coat.

"Half a mile up the lane—Margaret is there. Please get on the pony and ride back; it will be the quickest."

Mr. Heathcote did as she desired, and his wife put a kind arm round the trembling girl's waist.

"Don't be frightened, dear—a fall often seems worse than it really is. My husband will carry her here, and we will go and meet them. Lottie will see that all is comfortable for her here;" and she whispered a few words in the child's ear, which sent her into the house, eager to prepare for her friend's reception.

Lina led the way up the lane, and it was not long before they met the melancholy little procession—Mr. Heathcote carrying the still unconscious child in his arms, and Margaret leading the pony. Little Belle was very pale and her eyes were closed; but as Mrs. Heathcote felt her pulse and brow, her expression somewhat re-

assured the two sisters in the agony of their suspense. "I think she has only fainted from the shock," she said, tenderly stroking back the long fair hair which streamed over her husband's shoulder. Please God, she will soon be better."

The simple words seemed each worth a mine of gold to the two girls, and even Margaret was now only too content to obey the directions of one wiser and more experienced than herself.

Belle was carried into the house and laid on Lottie's bed, and it was not long before she opened her eyes and looked round in bewilderment at the strange scene. Her first word—how inexpressibly sweet it sounded to the anxious listeners—was "Maggie!" and as her sister knelt down and kissed her, an expression of perfect content overspread the little face.

A messenger had already been despatched to Oxenden for the doctor, but when he came he said care and quietness were all that were needed; and though the delicate little frame had sustained a shock, he hoped no serious consequences would ensue. He recommended that she should not be moved for a few days, and Mrs. Heathcote readily undertook the charge of her. As, however, Margaret could not bear to leave her darling, a bed was made up on the sofa for her, and Lottie was banished to a spare attic—every one falling into these arrangements with a cheerful readiness and hospitality which caused Margaret many pangs of reproach for her own former coldness.

Mr. Gresham was in London, and the doctor

said there was no need to hasten his return, which was fixed for the following day. Lina drove to meet him at the station, and broke the news to him in some trepidation for the result. He was at first much shocked and alarmed, then, man-like, inclined to be exceedingly angry at the folly and rashness which had caused the accident; but by the time he reached the village his feelings had somewhat calmed down. He desired the coachman to drive round by the White House, and, when he had reached it, was much cheered by Mrs. Heathcote's cordial greeting. She conducted him upstairs, where he found his little girl sitting up in bed looking very happy and comfortable, with only a small strip of plaister on the forehead to give evidence of the accident. Lottie was perched on the foot of the bed, reading a story-book to her friend, and both looked well pleased with each other's company.

Margaret, who was working in the window, came forward, and greeted her father silently. As soon as he had kissed Belle, and spoken a few merry words to both children, she drew him from the room, and burst forth with her confession: "Papa, it was all my fault; Watson warned me that it might happen; I would not listen, and I might have killed her!"

Mr. Gresham, who was a reserved man, hated scenes, especially with his elder daughter, on whose judgment he had for years been accustomed to rely. He did not in the least know how to respond to this outburst of penitence and

remorse, so he was anxious to cut it short if possible.

"Well, well, my dear, it might have been worse—women are always silly where horses are concerned. The child seems doing well, and I am sure we may be grateful to see her in such good hands."

Margaret could at any rate echo this sentiment, as she noted the motherly care which anticipated the little invalid's slightest need, and the tender consideration which spared herself and her father all anxiety. It was impossible to resist such kindness, and by degrees she herself began to draw aside the stiff curtain of reserve, which made her so unprepossessing to a new acquaintance, and to let the true warm heart discover itself.

Lottie, who had long admired Miss Gresham with reverential awe, began to find that she was loveable as well as stately, and Mrs. Heathcote, who from the first had felt drawn to the motherless girls, was glad to find them all at last ready to respond to her advances.

There was one night on which Belle was slightly feverish, and her sister felt too anxious to lie down. Mrs. Heathcote insisted on keeping her company, and in the long watches the two sat together in a little dressing-room adjoining that in which the invalid, after a while, slept soundly. It was then that Margaret learnt more particulars of her friend's former life than she had even guessed at hitherto; that she was

shown the photographs of Flora and Willie—the two little ones who rested in the far-away churchyard on the outskirts of the busy city ; that she heard of the anguish with which, day by day, the patient wife had seen her husband go forth to minister among his flock, when scarce a house in the locality had escaped a fearful visitation of small-pox.

“I used to thank God each night for bringing him home safe and unscathed as yet, and it was wonderful how every morning new strength seemed to come for the day’s work ! John is not a strong man, but he seemed then to be gifted with supernatural powers of endurance, and he used to say that it showed how God could use his weakest vessels to do the work he had appointed. And in many cases such good was wrought through the evil ! I have read some lines since that were written on a similar case :—

‘ How often are they made to bless the soul,
While they beset the body with the woes
Of some disease that warns the world away,
Who watch for all whom earthly hopes betray,
The heavy laden and forlorn to aid,
And lead them pointing upward.’

We had a kind, good friend, who took Lottie away with her into purer air. I don’t know how we could have borne the risk for our last remaining little one ; but after she was gone, John and I had no doubt where our duty lay. And we have had cause to be so grateful since ! There were

some houses that had been almost closed against him before that time, but when the people found him braving disease and death to come amongst them to minister to their souls, and bodies too, they said that that man's religion must have something in it! We had only one servant—an elderly woman, who had had the disease, and we ourselves were re-vaccinated, and took the necessary precautions. There was one poor carpenter, who had been an unbeliever, and who had shut the door rudely in John's face more than once when he had dared to remonstrate with him on keeping his children unbaptised. At last his wife caught the small-pox, and one by one the children sickened. Scarcely one of his neighbours would venture inside the house, but John went to them regularly, and read and prayed by the poor woman, and carried any little comforts to them that we could provide. Poor thing! at first the thought of death seemed very terrible, but John cheered and comforted her, and led her to rest on the strength that is above all, and she died at last quite peacefully. After that the poor father seemed as if he could scarcely bear my husband out of his sight. He became an earnest, humble-minded Christian, and when, after long doubt and agony, the children recovered, he declared that John had been God's instrument in saving them. I cannot tell you what a friend and fellow-helper that man has been to us ever since. I believe he would cut off his right hand to do John a service."

CHAPTER VII.

MARKET-DAY.

"I SHALL be late for markt," said Mr. Gale one morning early in November, as he climbed into his dog-cart and took the whip, which one of his men handed up to him. "Now, Missis, no more commissions if you please; I've not another minute to spare." He shook the reins, and the sturdy chesnut cob set off at a brisk trot, but as he turned out of the gate, Mr. Gale again pulled up suddenly.

"Bless my soul! there's that gap in the fence below the orchard—if it isn't filled up, the cattle will be all into my mangold field, as sure as anything. I forgot about it when I had them turned in. Charley!"

"Yes, sir!" The boy came running to him and listened to the directions given with difficulty, while the cob, who was cold and impatient, was fidgetting and curvetting about the road.

"Tell Martin to cut some furze bushes and get that gap—stand still you fool—that gap between the orchard and the mangold-field filled up as soon as possible."

"Martin is away to-day, sir—his wife is bad."

"Confound it! then get someone else, can't

you ! I believe every one's gone daft this morning."

And the impatient farmer and his irritable steed were out of sight and hearing before Charley had time to ask another question. The boy's temper was not what it had once been ; he had lost the open-hearted, obliging spirit which formerly would have led him to spare no pains to do his master a service, and he walked sullenly away, muttering to himself that he did not know who to tell—it was very hard to be expected to see after everything, and only get abused for your pains.

His fellow-workmen were at breakfast, and he went about his own avocations as usual, and was so much disturbed at finding Primrose, his favourite Guernsey cow, looking dull about the eyes, and apparently suffering from a chill, that he forgot everything else in attending to her comfort. He called his mistress out to see her, and Mrs. Gale was nearly as much troubled as himself, and decided that he had better walk to Oxenden at once in quest of the farrier.

Alas ! this was sending Charley into the very jaws of temptation, for in Oxenden lived several of his most idle acquaintances, and to make matters worse this was the day of the fair, and the village was full of booths and merry-go-rounds, and other enticing pit-falls for unguarded youth.

To do Charley justice the sick cow was his first thought ; he left his message at the house of the farrier, who was out, and received a promise that

it should be given to him immediately on his return, but after that he did not see any particular need for hurrying away from those delightful gingerbread stalls, and the shooting gallery where Johnnie Ford was so goodnatured as to stand treat for three shots.

When he did at last get back to the farm it was much later than he had supposed, and the first sight which met his eyes was the chesnut cob steaming with heat, being rubbed down by one of the farm men. The latter looked up and grinned as Charley approached.

"Hullo, lad ! so you are back at last. Tell you what—you'd best keep out of the master's way ; he's in a proper taking, I can tell you."

"Why, what's the matter ?" inquired Charley, at a loss to know what special misdeed of his had just now transpired.

"Matter enough—the cattle have all been in the mangolds a treading them up shocking, and eating of them. Master says he told you before he went about filling up the gap."

"So I did, you idle, careless, good-for-nothing rascal," said the farmer's voice behind them, and Charley who was no coward, turned round, and met his master's inflamed and angry face.

"I believe you are the very incarnate spirit of mischief—I do," said the passionate man, stamping with vexation ; "no one could speak plainer than I did, but you left it undone on purpose."

"That's not true !" said Charley indignantly, "and you know it isn't——"

A stinging box on the ear stopped his further speech.

"So you dare to give me the lie, you young scoundrel, do you? Be off about your business, and be thankful to get off without the thrashing you deserve."

"See if I don't serve you out for this some day, Mr. Gale!" almost screamed the boy, whom the injustice had roused into open defiance.

The farmer laughed contemptuously and turned away, not feeling wholly satisfied, now that he was beginning to cool down, with his own share in the late proceedings. He was usually good-natured and easy, almost to a fault, but to-day everything had conspired to try his temper. The cob had been troublesome going in, and had delayed him nearly half-an-hour by refusing to pass a threshing-machine near the road side. He had reached Fullington too late to purchase some Southdown sheep on which he had long had his eye; his own fat beasts had failed to make the price he had calculated upon; a troublesome poor relation of his wife's had turned up unexpectedly, and had worried him into lending a sum which he could very inconveniently spare; in fact, it had been what children call "a day of misfortunes."

Mr. Gale was a sober man, but on market-days he usually allowed himself one glass of hot spirits and water with a friend, and to-day he had indulged in a second to console himself after his ill luck. It had sent him home heated and much more irascible than usual, and the sight which

met his eyes, of the cattle trampling down his splendid crop of mangolds, was not likely to have a soothing effect.

Had Charley accepted his reproof in silence, it is probable that the farmer's good nature would soon have re-asserted itself, and the matter have blown over; but, as it was, there was nothing to be done but for the boy to return once more to be a burden on his poor mother's hands. Even Miss Gresham's influence would, he knew, avail him little now, nor indeed since his recent misconduct in church was it likely to be exerted in his behalf.

Charley went home that night in a state of sulky despondency, which soon convinced his mother that something was wrong. After much questioning she forced from him a not over truthful account of the cause of his dismissal, and then, to avoid her tears and reproaches, the boy wandered out again into the dreary darkness, and only too naturally turned his steps in the direction of the public-house.



CHAPTER VIII.

FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

ON the following Sunday afternoon rather a larger congregation than usual was assembled in the village church. The weather was fine and bright, and though a keen frosty feeling in the air gave warning that winter was not now very distant, the hedges were still gay with many-hued briar leaves and large satin-like fronds of hart's-tongue untouched as yet by frost, while myriads of berries on hawthorn and holly promised good store of provision for the birds, and caused village wise-acres to prophesy a severe winter.

Mr. Heathcote's sermons were popular from their clearness and brevity, and the service in the afternoon was usually well attended, but it happened that on this particular Sunday several strangers had walked over from Oxenden, and thus nearly every seat was filled.

The curate had just mounted the pulpit steps, and was about to give out his text, when the unusual sound of hasty footsteps was heard in the church porch; a moment more and the large western door was thrown open, and a servant maid from Coldbrook farm, with two little children clinging to her dress, rushed up the aisle to Mr.

Gale's seat, and whispered a few hurried words to its occupants. Almost before she had finished speaking, the farmer strode down the aisle and through the open door, while a strange rustle of excitement began to pervade the whole congregation.

Mrs. Gale, who was a little deaf, had not at first understood what the summons had been, but she stood up trembling and agitated, and the younger child, frightened at its mother's face, set up a roar which drowned every other sound.

Mr. Heathcote bent over the pulpit rails, and whispered a word to his wife, who rose quietly and went to the poor woman. But in the meantime the words "Fire at Coldbrook farm. Mr. Gale's buildings are on fire!" had spread through the congregation.

Poor Mrs. Gale was evidently on the verge of hysterics, and there was nothing for it but to get her out as quickly as possible; and a glance at the agitated and excited faces around him convinced Mr. Heathcote that his sermon for that day had better be omitted.

Closing his book he said quietly: "My friends, those among you who can be of real use will, I am sure, do what you can for our neighbour in this strait; let me advise the rest to go home." He then made a sign to Mr. Gresham, and the old gentleman in trembling accents pronounced the blessing. It spoke well, perhaps, for the habitual reverence of the people of Hacklebury that they waited for its close before they all hurried into

the air, eager to ask and hear what had really happened.

Alas ! a red, lurid glare behind the trees which hid Coldbrook farm from view, left no room for doubt. At the sight of it, poor Mrs. Gale fainted outright, while her children and the servant renewed their lamentations. The latter was unable to give any succinct account of what had taken place. She had been out with the children in one of the fields behind the rick-yard, when suddenly a cloud of smoke in the air had made her uneasy, and running back she had found the big barn in flames. The weather had for some time past been unusually dry, and there was a strong north-east wind blowing.

While Mrs. Heathcote and the Greshams were trying to revive the poor fainting woman, Mr. Heathcote, who had hastily thrown off his surplice, came out of the vestry door. "You had better take her home with you—or up to the Court, if Miss Gresham does not mind," he said, nodding to his wife. "Where's the squire?"

"I think he has gone across the fields by the short cut," Margaret answered. "Please tell Mr. Gale we will take care of his wife and children;" and taking the younger babe in her arms, she handed over the other to Belle, whose caresses soon comforted the little thing's agitation.

At the farm the scene of confusion, where all was usually so peaceful and prosperous, was indeed sad to witness. A message had been despatched with all possible speed in quest of the

fire-engine in Oxenden, and the squire had sent off a man and horse to procure one of the larger engines in Fullington; but some time elapsed before either could arrive, and meanwhile the fire was making fearful progress.

Mr. Gale's misery was increased by the recollection that his last made corn-ricks and part of his fat stock were not insured. The greater part of the buildings was roofed with thatch, and Mr. Heathcote and the squire were both convinced of the necessity of keeping this wet, in order to prevent the flames from spreading from the barn to the other out-houses.

A number of ready hands were found to hand up buckets of water from the well, while others emptied them as fast as possible over the roof; and one or two, by the squire's advice, began tearing down the thatch in the part nearest to the burning building.

The poor farmer stood in the midst dazed and bewildered with the sudden blow, his usually ruddy face looking ghastly in the livid light, and his broad shoulders bowed like those of an old man. It seemed as if he were utterly powerless to aid the well meant labours of his friends, and could only look on in dull and vacant despair.

All at once a cry arose among the men that the flames had spread to the cattle shed. There was a rush to set the animals free, and one by one the frightened creatures were coaxed or dragged out of their dangerous abode. The deadly foe was, however, too swift in the race;

after the young cattle and most of the dairy cows had been rescued, there still remained three valuable fat beasts, and poor Primrose (who for warmth had been placed in a stall at the furthest end of the building), and it was evident it would be a service of great danger and difficulty to reach them.

The herdsman, however, made a rush, but was beaten back by the smoke which nearly blinded and choked him. The farmer covered his face with his hands, and cried like a child, as the lowing of the agonised beasts met his ear. Mr. Heathcote could not bear the sight, and forgetting his total inexperience, flung a coat round his head, and dashed bravely into the long shed once more. The herdsman and two more followed him closely ; for a moment the blinding rush made them stagger back, but they held their breath and pressed on ; one huge shorthorn was loosed from his chain, and urged forwards by blows and shouts, plunged through the darkness into safety. They reached the next and tried to rescue him also, but in vain—the creature was mad with terror, and turned savagely on his would-be preservers. The flames were gaining on them fast, and Mr. Heathcote, whose strength was far inferior to his courage, soon found himself reeling and breathless. A moment more, and he had dropped almost senseless under the feet of the maddened bullock.

“Come back, come back !” shouted the squire’s voice at the door ; “a man’s life is worth more than a beast’s ;” and breaking from those

who would have stood in his way, he sprang forward and helped to extricate the three workmen, and the nearly helpless form of his friend, from the falling building.

It was plain that the remaining poor creatures must be abandoned to their fate, and the farmer, as he walked to and fro in aimless misery, thanked Heaven that his wife was out of sight and hearing.

"Poor Primrose! she did love that heifer, the Missis did, well-nigh next to the children. I believe it will break her heart!"

The squire spoke to him and tried to rouse him, but in vain. To and fro he walked with head sunk on his chest, and eyes on the ground, till they began to fear that trouble had turned his brain. Only once did he look up and speak, and those who heard him trembled at the fierce, wild bitterness of his tone.

"May the God who made me punish the scoundrel who has done this! May the flames consume him body and soul." A hand on his shoulder interrupted the half-spoken imprecation. Mr. Heathcote, pale and haggard, with dress and hair scorched by his recent fierce encounter, was by his side.

"Curse not even him!" he said solemnly. "God will surely visit such a sin in His own way. And do not lose heart, Mr. Gale—much is saved; and look, here come the engines."

A few hours later, when all that was possible had been done, when the unfortunate family and the

shelterless beasts had all found temporary refuges in the homes and farm-buildings of the neighbours, the squire and Mr. Heathcote, arm in arm, were walking sadly homewards in the light of the wintry moon. The curate was deep in thought; his eyes were on the ground, and he seemed scarcely able to keep pace with the long vigorous strides of his companion.

"Depend upon it," the latter was saying, "it is as I said, and that wretched boy is the author of the mischief. He was seen hanging about by the servant this afternoon, and now he has altogether disappeared. We were mad to keep such a ne'er-do-well in the parish, but my daughter Meg is hard to oppose when she gets the bit between her teeth. She worried and cajoled poor Gale into taking the fellow on after he had discharged him once, and this is the result. Gale has often said that his idleness and rascality were intolerable, and he owns he was provoked into striking him on Wednesday last; and this, doubtless, is his revenge. Well, he will be easily caught, and the punishment is a tremendously severe one for deliberate incendiarism; but that will not be much comfort to the Gales, poor things! I suppose we shall have to send the hat round in their behalf! I declare, if I could get hold of that heartless young scamp, I should be tempted to take the law into my own hands, and break every bone in his body."

Mr. Heathcote sighed heavily. "I cannot bring myself to believe so young a lad would deliberately

commit such a crime," he said; "surely it might be the result of accident. May I not ask you," he added, laying his hand pleadingly on his friend's arm, "to say nothing of these suspicions until the grounds for them are more fully proved? It is a fearful responsibility to attach such a stigma to the character of any man—especially one so young."

"My dear fellow," the squire answered, with a laugh, "of course you may ask what you like. I am sure no one has a better right after your services of this day; but don't let Meg make a fool of you as she has of others. Who but this boy could have any motive in doing Gale such an injury? But here we are on your door-step, and Mrs. Heathcote anxiously waiting for you. Your father is all right, my dear," he added, as Lottie flew up to them, and seemed scarcely to recognise the two smoke-blackened, drenched, and haggard-looking figures, "but he has been having a toughish encounter with fire and water, and will need all your care. Let him have a warm bath and get him to bed as soon as he can;" and the squire hurried away to set his old uncle's mind at rest before seeking his own home.



CHAPTER IX.

THE CURATE'S MORNING WALK.

MR. HEATHCOTE was astir even earlier than usual on the following morning. Long before daylight he was dressed, and moving quietly so as not to disturb his sleeping wife and child, he let himself out into the garden, noiselessly opened and closed the gate, and was soon walking rapidly in the direction of Widow Benson's cottage. The squire's terrible suspicion had dwelt on his mind more than he had at first thought possible, and he could not rest without knowing more.

The morning air was sharp and keen, and the rime lay thick on grass and hedges. As the sun gradually rose from a crimson ball on the horizon into a flood of bright and glorious light over the whole landscape, every cobweb glistened with diamond drops, and a silver haze seemed to encrust the brown leaves on the hedgerows. In spite of his absorption, Mr. Heathcote could not but notice the glory and beauty of the winter morn, and share some of the enjoyment of his little dog, which capered and frisked in front of him, hardly able to find expression for its spirits. In course of time he reached his destination, and,

mindful of the poor woman's nerves, knocked very softly at the closed door.

"Who is there?" cried a voice, trembling with anxiety.

"It is I—Mr. Heathcote. Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Benson, I have not brought any bad news."

The assurance was needed, for the poor woman, as she admitted him, looked so ghastly that he feared she was going to faint. It was evident she had not been in bed all night, and her usually trim, neat appearance was changed to one of miserable disorder, which made her look much older than she really was.

"Don't be afraid," Mr. Heathcote repeated, kindly; "I only came thus early because I feared you might be anxious and in trouble. Don't tremble so, but sit down and tell me why the sight of me has so alarmed you."

She sank into a chair, still keeping her strained hollow eyes intently fixed on his face.

"Sir," she burst out presently, "you know something. You've come to make me confess, but I won't—I know nothing; there is nothing to tell, if I were to die for saying so! Oh, you are cruel, cruel, to come and try to make a mother ruin her own son,—and it's not true—it's all a plot to destroy him—my boy, my Charley—who wouldn't hurt a fly! How can they say he did this thing—he who never harmed a dumb brute in his life, or bore malice for a hard word?"

"Hush! hush!" said Mr. Heathcote, sooth-

ingly; "you know not what you are saying. Try to be calm. Believe me, I am not come to do Charley any injury—I have no authority to interfere with him. I came but as your friend and his—as your clergyman, whose heart must grieve when any of his flock are in trouble."

"I know, sir, I know,"—and flinging her apron over her head, she sobbed convulsively. "You are very kind, and I'm grateful to you for coming. I thought I should have gone mad here all alone, and I dared not go near any of my neighbours. Where my poor lad is, the Lord only knows!—far away from here by this time, belike. But, ah! if he has done this thing, as they say, what's the use? The bloodhounds will soon be on his track."

"Mrs. Benson," the clergyman said in his quiet, impressive tone, "if your son has done this—nay, hear me out," as the mother in her anguish almost shrieked a denial—"if he has been so misguided and unhappy, I cannot bring myself to believe that it was an act of deliberate wickedness."

"God bless you!—God for ever bless you for those words," the poor creature cried, seizing his hand. "He would not do it on purpose—he could not. My Charley was ever a soft-hearted lad, though so wild. A kind word could always guide him; but he was spoiled when he was little, and never could learn to obey."

"I believe that this act, if it were his, was not done intentionally," Mr Heathcote repeated;

"and I believe there is one other person, though only one, who holds the same belief—Miss Margaret Gresham. I have, with great difficulty, prevailed upon the squire to delay issuing a warrant for his apprehension, in the hope that some light may be thrown on this mystery. But I must tell you, Mrs. Benson, that circumstances are strong against him; his disappearance since yesterday afternoon especially tells against him. If he be innocent of the worst part of this crime, his only hope lies in coming forward without delay, and making a full confession of all he knows. And the question is, Where is he to be found? You see, the very fact of his being afraid to appear is strong evidence of his guilt. If you know—if you have any suspicion at all where he may be found—I entreat you, for your own sake and his, to be frank with me."

"I cannot tell," the mother answered sadly, for she had been won to confidence by the gentleness of Mr. Heathcote's manner. "I've not seen him since yesterday noon when he had his dinner, and I scolded him, poor lad, for not going to morning church; but 'Mother,' he says, 'I've no heart to go now I'm out of the choir, least of all to-day, since Mr. Gale turned me off again;' and then he gave a laugh, and tried to look as if he didn't care,—but I knew better, for a minute after he said he wished he could know how Primrose was, and wondered if she'd missed him yesterday. Well, he went out after dinner, and my mind misgave me he'd gone down to the

'Red Lion;' but I didn't ask anything, knowing it was no use. And that's the very last time I set eyes on him," added the poor woman, with another burst of grief.

Mr. Heathcote considered for a few minutes, and then said, with an assumed cheerful tone and manner which took his hostess by surprise, "Mrs. Benson, when I came to pay you this early visit, I left home without my breakfast, as none of my household were astir. I shall think it very kind if you will make me a cup of tea."

The poor woman rose willingly, and for the moment put her sorrows aside, in her anxiety to wait on her guest. She rekindled the fire which was black in the grate, put the kettle on to boil, and brought out her best cup and saucer, wiping away her tears as she observed that it had been a legacy to Charley from her poor sister.

"Nay, you must bring another," Mr. Heathcote said, smiling; "I cannot breakfast alone. Please, Mrs. Benson, sit down, and I will take a slice of that excellent home-baked loaf, if you will promise to do the same."

She shook her head. "I can't eat, sir; it would go nigh to choke me." She did not, however, refuse the cup of tea which he poured out and placed by her, and he saw that it was grateful to her parched lips and aching head.

She looked somewhat revived after it, and poured out another half mechanically; while Mr. Heathcote sipped his in silence, deep in thought. Presently he said: "An idea strikes me, but it is

so vague that I shall not attempt to explain it to you. Will you give me another piece of bread to put in my pocket? Thanks. Now I am provided for a long walk. Good-bye, Mrs. Benson; keep up your heart and pray for better times. I will try to see you again ere long."

As Mr. Heathcote left the cottage he took out his watch, and finding that it was still very early, he resolved to prolong his walk, and to visit some cottages in an adjoining parish, of which the vicar, a friend of his own, was absent owing to ill-health. The way led through a steep and narrow lane on the outskirts of Oxenden common—a broad open tract of wild moorland, seldom frequented save by sheep, and a few turf-cutters living in the poorer parts of Oxenden. It was very cold and bleak, yet the fresh open expanse seemed full of life-giving power to Mr. Heathcote, whose lungs had so long been choked by the fog-laden atmosphere of a thickly-inhabited city.

He walked on, feeling as if he gained strength and vigour at every step, and rejoicing in the knowledge that this blessing had come to him in such good time. Still, as he climbed higher, and gained the most unfrequented part of the common, he felt the wind whistle keenly round him, and half smiled to himself as he thought of the lecture in store for him for omitting to put on his great-coat. Taking out his little pocket compass, he soon discovered that his most direct way lay straight across the brown tract of faded heather

and bracken, and hoping that a sharp look-out would enable him to escape morasses and rabbit-holes, and eventually to again strike into a frequented path, he whistled Sandy back from a vain pursuit of a partridge, and plunged resolutely across the moor. The sun now shone out



MR. HEATHCOTE ON THE MOOR.

brilliantly, the sky overhead was of the most dazzling blue, and a robin, which had perched on a stunted tree growing on an old hedgerow beside a morass, trilled forth its clear little note of hope and gladness.

Mr. Heathcote paused to listen to the bright little songster, and to recover his breath, which

had been somewhat tried by his quick walk through the frosty air. Suddenly his little dog, which had lately kept close at his heels, sprang forward, barking excitedly. Thinking he had found an imaginary stoat or hedgehog, Mr. Heathcote laughed and clapped his hands, urging him forwards.

The dog flew up to the low bank on which grew one or two leafless and stunted trees, stopped short, and backed as if in alarm, and continued to bark violently at what seemed an inanimate clump of bracken. Mr. Heathcote, puzzled, went nearer to examine the cause of the animal's excitement, when, greatly to his surprise, a human face, so pale and ghastly as to be almost unrecognisable, rose up from the lair where it had been seeking a miserable shelter from the piercing cold, and confronted him.

For a moment the curate scarcely knew how to act; the wild look of the eyes, like those of a hunted creature suddenly brought to bay, made him dread he scarcely knew what desperate act on the part of the unhappy boy, for it need hardly be said that it was no other than Charley Benson, whose hiding-place he had unexpectedly discovered. They gazed at each other spell-bound for some ten or fifteen seconds, and then with a kind of cry or groan of wild despair, the boy turned as if to fly.

Instantly Mr. Heathcote's hand was on his arm, and the grasp, though gentle, was one which he could not shake off.

"Stop," said the curate very quietly, while hastily turning over in his mind the best course to pursue. Then, as if with a sudden impulse, he added, "I have just left your mother."

The boy half ceased to struggle against the detaining hand; while his wild, bloodshot eyes were riveted on the other's face, and it seemed as if he could not speak.

"You must come back if you would not have her life to answer for," the clergyman said, still in the same calm, steady voice. "Whatever has happened, you will make it worse by leaving her thus."

The boy's lips were set, and his whole face convulsed with agony as at last he answered in a low, hoarse voice: "I durstn't; they will hang me, if they find me."

"No, no," said Mr. Heathcote, "there is no fear of that, at least. Thank God, no human lives were lost in the fire. But if it was your doing, in God's name tell the truth now, my boy. It is the only amends you can make."

"I did not mean it," the boy cried passionately. "I would not hurt a hair of their heads on purpose; and Primrose—poor Primrose——" He flung himself face downwards on the turf, and sobbed convulsively.

Mr. Heathcote waited awhile; and then touching him on the shoulder, said gently: "If you are speaking the truth when you say it was not done purposely, you have removed a great load from my mind, Charley. Now, look up and be brave;

tell me all there is to tell ; and let me see if anything can be done to help you."

The kind tone seemed more bewildering to Charley than any amount of roughness would have been, and it was some moments before he could manage to reply. "It was I did it, sir ; but I never meant it. God knows I did not."

"I believe you," Mr. Heathcote said gently ; "now tell me how and when it happened."

Very incoherently, and with many interruptions, the boy poured forth his confession. After his dismissal from the farm, feeling desperate about the future, and bitterly angered and humiliated by the rough treatment of his master (which the other farm-servants had witnessed), he had sought consolation and forgetfulness at the ale-house and in the society of his worst companions. On Sunday he was in no state for church, and his mother's reproaches had added to his feverish and reckless despair. One softening thought had, however, interposed in all the flood of bitterness—it was that of the dumb creature which he had loved and tended, and which he feared might be a sufferer by his absence. The thought of Primrose troubled him more and more, and at last he resolved to creep down to the farm during the afternoon church hour, when he knew that Mr. Gale and his family would be absent.

On his way he fell in with two or three of his friends, who chaffed him about his sentiment over

an old cow, and finally agreed to bear him company in his walk.

They were all smoking, and Charley, who had become rather fond of the practice, was readily prevailed upon to accept a cheap cigar—one which Jack Holmes assured him was such as no gentleman would despise.

They reached the farm undisturbed, and Charley, nothing loath, did the honours to his companions, holding forth volubly on the merits of the live stock. All at once an alarm arose that voices (afterwards proved to be those of the children and their nurse) were heard approaching, and Jack Holmes, who had already been once warned off Mr. Gale's premises, was much alarmed lest the farmer should return and find him loitering aimlessly about. They were in the rick-yard at the time, and there was a quantity of straw lately threshed lying about. Hastily whispering a warning to his companions, Jack crouched behind a big corn-rick, and pulled Charley down beside him. They waited awhile, and then hearing no more, crept cautiously out, and ran for their lives.

It was not until they were well out in the open fields that one or two of the party, pulling their pipes from their pockets, reminded Charley of his only partially-consumed cigar. Holmes had finished his before entering the farm-yard, so his mind was at ease on his own score. But Charley had totally forgotten his dangerous appendage in the hurry and confusion of his flight, and great

was his alarm when he saw the long faces of his friends. They tried to laugh it off, however, and consoled him by the assurance that at any rate it was no use going back now to get them all into trouble. Charley could not go home; he wandered about the fields aimlessly for some time, until like a thunder-clap the awful tidings of the fire at Coldbrook Farm—tidings with which the very air seemed laden—struck on his ear.

After that he had but one impulse, that of blind, headlong flight. It was easy to carry this out; for he met not a single creature, every one else being drawn as by one common interest to the scene of the disaster.

Only one little girl—an orphan child to whom Charley had once or twice been kind in old school days—met and recognised him, and from her he learnt the news of poor Primrose's fate, and the destruction and ruin of the homestead.

And the voice hounding him on to flight seemed louder than ever in his ears; and he ran headlong, he knew not why or whither, until he reached the wild, open common, and dropped at last utterly exhausted among the ferns where the curate had found him.

All this in broken, incoherent sentences Mr. Heathcote learned from the boy's parched lips, and then in doubt and pity he paused awhile, while his prisoner, for so he felt almost bound to consider him, sank back into his lair, shivering with cold and fear, and sat huddled up, awaiting his decision.

"Charley," he said at last, very firmly but gently, "you must come home with me—not to your mother's house, it is better that she should not know of this yet, but to mine; and you must there confess to others as you have to me all that you know of this unhappy business. What may be the result I cannot tell. I dare not bid you hope for what seems more than human mercy; but at least I feel sure that nothing but evil can come of your hiding away and attempting to escape from the pursuers who would soon be on your track. Where were you making for when you wandered here?"

The boy rubbed his eyes and still looked as if only half awakened from some frightened dream. "I don't know, sir. I only thought of hiding away for a bit, and then maybe I might walk and beg my way till I got to the sea, and get off as a stowaway, or what not, God knows! If I had died last night it would have been better for me and mother too!"

"Don't say that," said Mr. Heathcote, unable to help pitying the utter hopeless despair expressed in the young face and bowed shoulders, "God may be sparing you for better things—courage, now and tell the truth! It is the only amends you can make."

He turned to walk homewards as he spoke, and the boy, apparently making a desperate effort of resolution, moved onwards by his side, but his feeble, uncertain gait and haggard face could not but rouse Mr. Heathcote's compassion.

"When did you last eat anything?" he asked.

The boy shook his head with a puzzled look. "I don't know, sir—dinner time yesterday, I think. I don't seem to remember anything clearly."

"And you have lain out in the cold common all night?"

"Oh no! I walked and ran till the moon went down, thinking all the time I was getting further from home, and feeling as if someone were after me, but I must have lost my way to have gone no further than where you found me. And then I fancy I must have dropped down all of a heap at last, for I don't remember anything more till I heard your little dog barking."

Here Mr. Heathcote recollected the piece of bread with which Mrs. Benson had provided him, and handing it to Charley with a smile, he bade him eat it and think of the good mother out of whose oven it had come. But the mention of his mother was too much for the lad, weak and exhausted as he was, and turning away after a faint struggle for manliness, he burst into a flood of tears.

Mr. Heathcote felt glad to see him thus softened; he said nothing for a while, but when he saw he was growing calmer, he laid his hand on his shoulder, and with a few kind words drew from him the confession of the long course of wrong-doing into which he had been led. That he repented now was clear, but had that repentance come too late as far as his prospects in this world were concerned?

"I'd go to prison willingly, sir," he sobbed out, "if it would bring Primrose to life again. When I think how I killed her, I feel as if nothing could be too bad for me."

Very gently and gradually Mr. Heathcote tried to raise his thoughts to the higher tribunal by which his actions must be judged, and the boy listened and assented in a patient, spirit-broken way that made his heart ache.

By taking the least frequented road, they at last contrived to reach the White House without observation.

Taking his companion in by the back door, Mr. Heathcote quietly summoned his wife, told her in a few words what had been the result of his morning's walk, and begged her to take charge of the lad, while he himself took the step which seemed next most right and necessary.

Kind Mrs. Heathcote's heart ached for the forlorn and miserable appearance of her prisoner, and while obeying her husband's injunctions not to lose sight of him, she managed, with Lottie's help, to provide him with a warm breakfast, which brought a faint tinge of colour back into his hollow cheeks. She did not talk to him, fearing to weaken the effect of her husband's words, but there was something in the look of her kind, motherly face, as she sat at her work and supplied his wants, which soothed the poor lad in spite of his hopelessness.

CHAPTER X.

FORGIVEN.

MEANWHILE Mr. Heathcote, who would not let himself acknowledge fatigue while anything remained to be done, had hastened off to the house of a neighbour, where he knew that Mr. Gale had spent the night, his wife and children being housed at Oldcourt.

The poor farmer was sitting mournfully over the fire as he entered, wearied out and half stupified by the effect of yesterday's terrible experience. He rose mechanically as Mr. Heathcote entered, and remembering the curate's heartily given assistance, returned his shake of the hand with some cordiality.

Very gradually did Mr. Heathcote unfold the object of his visit, and it was well he was cautious, for at the first mention of Charley's name the farmer started to his feet, a dangerous gleam lighting his sunken eyes.

"Caught, is he? Then there will be some consolation for me at least. He shall pay for this—the young varmint—aye, to the uttermost farthing. I only wish 't were a hundred years ago, and a hanging matter!" He was starting forward in fierce haste, when Mr.

Heathcote's hand gently pressed him back into his seat.

"Hear me patiently but for five minutes more," and he proceeded as nearly word for word as he could remember it to repeat Charley's confession, adding a description of the boy's present state of repentant misery, and his widowed mother's despair.

The farmer listened, but the fierce light in his eye did not abate, and Mr. Heathcote felt more and more the hopelessness of his cause.

"Mr. Gale," he said at length, "I am pleading as perhaps I have no right to do, and I ask your forgiveness, but still as your friend, and as God's minister, I must say it. Human justice gives you a perfect right to hand over this unhappy boy to the utmost penalty of the law, a penalty that will be the more severe that his declaration of the absence of *malice prepense* only comes from himself, and circumstances go hard to prove the reverse. It would be contrary to human nature did you not require just retribution for the fearful loss that has befallen you, but, should you forego this retribution, you will be doing such a Christian act as the highest saints might envy."

"I'm no saint," growled the farmer, "and craving your reverence's pardon, I'm in no humour to listen to more sermonising—let me have justice! What's the crime of wanting that, I ask?"

"None," said the curate sadly, and he turned to go, feeling that no more could be said. But

at the door a sudden impulse made him turn, and glance once more at the stern, unbending face of the other. What there was in that look—how much of tender pity, of appeal to his better feelings, of sympathy with the trials he had no power to avert—Mr. Heathcote never knew, but something in it moved the stubborn fibres of his companion's heart.

"Stop," he said roughly, and then sitting down, he covered his face with his hands, as if afraid to trust himself further. At last he looked up, and said in a voice unlike his own, "I suppose you believe this tale yourself, since you try to foist it on me?"

"I do," Mr. Heathcote answered firmly. "I can hardly tell you why, but in my inmost heart I have no doubt whatever that this unhappy boy is now speaking truth."

"Well, then, in the devil's name take your own way!" cried the farmer, getting up, and beginning rapidly to pace the room, as if to work off his agitation. "Let him go—I care not—he can't injure me further, and I suppose you won't let me alone till you get your will."

"Nay, my friend," Mr. Heathcote said, as he warmly and even respectfully took the farmer's half-extended hand, "not in the devil's name can such a Christ-like act be done. Do you really mean it? Can you forego your just revenge and forbear to prosecute this unhappy creature? If so," as an impatient gesture of assent alone answered him, "let me say fervently, God

bless you for such an exercise of Christian charity. He will bless you—who can doubt it—for have you not perhaps this day saved a soul from death? I could not bid you do this as your duty—hardly even did I dare to ask it as a favour; but from my heart I thank you, and pray God you may be rewarded.”

Mr. Gale did not answer, and in silence they shook hands and parted, the curate’s heart full of gratitude for such a consummation as he had not dared to hope for.

His next duty was to seek the squire, whom he found conferring with old Mr. Gresham at the rectory. The latter’s kind old face brightened as Mr. Heathcote detailed the results of his morning’s work, but the squire was disposed to grumble at the ends of justice being thus defeated. He yielded, however, at last to the representations of Mr. Heathcote and his uncle, but only on condition that an edict of total banishment from Hacklebury should be passed on the unhappy author of the fire.

To this Mr. Heathcote assented, the more readily that he felt almost convinced that it would now be wholly impossible for the boy to find employment in his own neighbourhood.

“What can be done with him?” Mrs. Heathcote asked later in the day. In reply her husband handed her a letter, addressed to Robert Steel, the carpenter in whose terrible family troubles he had taken so keen an interest.

“He used to say he would do anything in the

whole world to serve me," Mr. Heathcote said, "this will put him to the proof. If this fails, I must think of some other plan, but it will not be easy."

The letter gave a brief sketch of Charley Benson's history and the recent deplorable events, and ended with these words—"And now, my dear Steel, I am about to take what you have every right to consider an undue advantage of the promise you generously made me when we last parted. Will you help me to reclaim this unhappy outcast from his own home and neighbourhood, and give him the opportunity of beginning a new and better life, and earning an honest maintenance? I believe he will try to do his best, and he is young and has life before him, though his prospects here are irretrievably blighted. If you can suggest any way in which he can obtain honest employment—no matter how humble—I believe you will be doing an act of genuine Christian charity."

Three days later Mr. Heathcote received the following reply: "Dear and Reverend Sir,—You judged rightly, that no service I can ever render you can be other than a privilege and a pleasure. If the lad is sharp and handy, as you say, he may as well turn his hand to carpentering as anything else. He will have to rough it at first, and must work for his keep. Afterwards, when he knows his business, I may see my way to paying him some small wages, or passing him on to some one else in the same line. At any rate, if you will

send him up, I'll do my best to make an honest man of him for your sake,"

"There!" said Mr. Heathcote, throwing the letter to his wife, "that good fellow has not disappointed my expectations. Now I must go to Mrs. Benson's, and get Charley rigged out without delay. The sooner he is away from here, where every one involuntarily shrinks from him with a kind of natural horror and distrust, the better for all. Well! it is casting one's bread on the waters! God grant that the result may be blessed!"



CHAPTER XI.

CONCLUSION—THE BLACK SHEEP RECLAIMED.

ON a bright summer day five years later, a happy group were assembled in the rectory porch. Old Mr. Gresham, now grown very feeble, was holding in his trembling hands a letter which Lottie Heathcote had just brought for his perusal.

It was from Charley Benson to his mother, and contained the welcome news that he was now a journeyman carpenter in receipt of good wages, and that his dear old mother must come up to London to spend her declining days happily in the cosy rooms he had been able to provide for her. "She is so pleased," Lottie added; "she has never been in London, she says, since her dear mistress died, and she has longed many a time to see the shops again, and feel there was a church in the next street to turn into, instead of having to tramp a mile through mud and stones."

"Ah! every one to his taste!" said Mrs. Heathcote. "What cruel banishment it would be to us now, John, would it not? But I am glad that poor Mrs. Benson has at last this blessing of a home with her son. What a comfort that he has turned out so well after all!"

"Yes," Mr. Heathcote said, "Steel has long spoken most highly of his honesty, perseverance, and steady wish to improve. That terrible climax in his life has indeed, by God's help, been the means of leading him to better things. Poor Mrs. Benson! she will feel leaving Ralph and Belle, and all her old associations."

"Oh!" said Lottie, "but she is so much comforted by the thought of seeing Mrs. Vernon sometimes. And you know that is very possible, for Aldershot is not very far from London."

"Dear Margaret!" said old Mr. Gresham fondly, "this will indeed be good news to send her. She fretted sadly over that boy's misdoings, and took more blame to herself than she deserved."

"How well her marriage has turned out!" observed Mrs. Heathcote. "I remember the squire lamented over it at first, thinking Major Vernon was too old and grave for her, and that his comparative poverty contrasted sadly with Lina's happy lot. But he is such a good man, and Margaret looks up to and trusts him so thoroughly, I don't think she would have been happy without a husband whom she thought better and wiser, and stronger in every way than herself. She is so engrossed now with her work among the soldiers' wives, and I can fancy how fond they all are of her, though she speaks only of her husband's popularity, and the way he is consulted and looked up to by the whole regiment. It must be a trying life too, with no settled home—what a contrast to Lina's sunshiny prosperity!"

"Lina makes a sweet little lady bountiful, in her own quiet way," the old man said fondly. "And Sir Herbert is such a nice fellow,—it is a great blessing to have her settled so happily near at hand. It must have been a sore wrench to poor George to part with them both on the same day. But Belle is growing up a dear girl, and learning to take her sisters' place. Well! I must write a line to Meg myself, and tell her this bit of good news about Charley Benson; it will gladden her heart, I know."

"And don't forget to tell her how he sent the first five pounds he had saved out of his wages to Mr. Gale," Mrs. Heathcote said eagerly. "You know he begged and entreated the farmer to let him go on doing it till he had paid off at least the value of the poor animals that were burned."

"It was very nice of Gale not to take it," Mr. Heathcote said. "I have a warm regard and admiration for that man, and am most thankful that he is beginning to lift his head above water again. It has been a long and trying ordeal, though the Squire has been most kind in reducing his rent, and giving him other indirect help. We have seen many changes during these five years of my ministry here, but I do not think anything has given me such a feeling of vivid joy and thankfulness, as the reformation and staunch promise of future well-doing of the Black Sheep of the Parish!"

THE END.

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